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*Creator gods.*—By CRAWFORD H. TOY, Professor in Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

ACCORDING to Mr. Andrew Lang, the original high gods of all savage peoples are beings who had no beginning and do not die; fathers of their people, patrons and guardians of morality for the tribe and for the individual. If, he says, in later times they show a lower character, it is because they have degenerated; the original pure instinct of the savage has become tainted by the growth of animistic culture, and it has required ages for men to get back to the plane of their primal innocence and ethical clear-sightedness. As such lower grades show themselves in all half-civilized nations, his theory involves the supposition of a universal process of religious degeneration, and he does not shrink from the logical conclusion. All the gods of the great nations, he maintains, have traversed this cycle of transformations, first a degradation and then an elevation. As an interesting instance of the process he cites Jehovah, the god of the Hebrews. In the earliest Hebrew records Jehovah is an immoral anthropomorphic person, but undoubtedly, says Mr. Lang, he was at an earlier stage moral; he had fallen from his high estate of the olden time when he was morally the equal of the Bushman Cagn and the Australian Daramulun and Baiame. No Hebrew or other Semitic ground for this statement is adduced or claimed by Mr. Lang, but in his mind it is demonstrated by the consideration that, if it were otherwise, the Hebrew theistic system would be inferior to that of all other primitive peoples. That is, he rests his construction of religious history on what he holds to be an established fact, namely, that all original creator gods are eternal and moral. The subsequent degeneration of these gods he ascribes to the influence of the animistic belief, a later growth, which, while it has given us as a precious possession the doctrine of the soul, led the popular fancy at first into all manner of degrading customs of worship and repulsive stories of gods. The alleged facts of savage belief on which this superstructure is based have been criticized by several recent writers,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Notably by Mr. Sidney Hartland, in *Folklore*, 1898.

and their details need not be repeated here. I wish to call attention to one or two errors into which, as it seems to me, Mr. Lang has fallen in the interpretation of his evidence.

One preliminary remark may be made. It has been said by eminent authorities that early religion has no connection with morals. This statement may mean that early morals are very low, or that early gods take no account of the conduct of men; the former of these propositions is to be taken with a "distinguo," the latter is contrary to much that we know of early peoples. As to the first, it is generally held (and it is admitted by Mr. Lang) that the moral character of a god is that of his worshipers, so that from the ethical attributes of a deity we may infer the ethical ideas of the community at the time when these attributes are ascribed to the deity; if he be thought of as a person, he must have some sort of moral character, and this must be included in the religion of the time. As to the second proposition, it is difficult, from paucity of data, to bring convincing evidence on one side or the other. Even the remarkably full and clear description of the Central Australians given by Messrs. Spencer and Gillen leaves much unexplained. These tribes do not appear to connect conduct with any superhuman being; but, on the one hand, they seem to have no religious worship of any kind, and indeed no gods; and, on the other hand, they have a definite system of moral conduct, so that, if they have gods, we cannot say that these do not take account of moral conduct. The question is well illustrated by the Old Testament records: if we looked only at the denunciations of the people by the prophets, we might conclude that the Israelitish religion of the time was quite divorced from morality, that the Yahweh of the popular faith cared for nothing but his perquisites of sacrifice; yet we can hardly suppose this possible of a community that produced the prophets and the legal codes. We find generally in savage peoples that the marriage laws (which are usually strict) are under the protection of the gods. As far as the evidence goes, it cannot be said that the gods ever stand aloof from morality as it is understood in their communities.<sup>1</sup> The question of the sort of morality in vogue in any given place and time is one of prime importance.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the two sorts of service offered to the gods, the ritual and the moral, the former is apt to be more in evidence; the latter may easily be overlooked by the observer.

Mr. Lang has collected a large mass of material going to show that many early creator gods are morally pure and high. He has omitted certain other material that looks in a different direction, but there is an element of truth in what he says: we do find good ethical ideas and customs in low tribes. What he fails to give due weight to is that this ethical element, embodied in the person of the god, represents nothing more than the simple kindly instincts and social necessities of all communities. Man is born with certain impulses of sympathy, which he shares to some extent with the lower animals. These impulses, when not counterbalanced by the selfish instinct, lead him to treat his fellow-man or fellow-animal with kindness. The well-known story of Mungo Park is a good illustration of natural sympathy. Savage man is free from some of the complications of civilized life—from the selfish impulses arising from the accumulation of personal property and from the innumerable obligations springing from multiplied relations with fellow-men. This simplicity of savage life gives it such an air of innocence that some philosophers have held that civilization means declension in virtue. That is an unwarranted fancy, but doubtless the simple virtues exist among savages.<sup>1</sup> Further, as soon as society is organized, some rules respecting regard for life and property must be established. It is not strange that Mr. Lang's savages should have laws against murder, theft and infringement of marriage rights, and that the gods should be the guardians of the laws. And this is all that is involved in his contention regarding early moral creators. They embody the current morality, and that represents the natural impulses of human beings.<sup>2</sup> It may be added that the 'eternal' character that he ascribes to early gods is of an equally simple nature. On this point the statements of savage theology are often vague: the creator may have had a beginning or he may not. Where he is conceived of as without beginning, this is due to the necessity of having some fixed point of starting. It is the negation of beginning and not the affirmation of eternity. It is impossible to go back and back

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<sup>1</sup> This remains true after the abstraction of probable or possible influence from contact with whites.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the precepts of the Kurnai god, given by Howitt, in *Journ. Anthr. Inst.*, 1885, p. 313.

for ever—one must pause somewhere.<sup>1</sup> How a given tribe came to fix on a certain person as the originator of the world, we cannot say; any such determination has been preceded by a long period of which no records exist, and the conception of the creator is doubtless a relatively late achievement.

The view that the animistic cult has induced degeneration appears to rest on a confusion of ideas. Since the morality of the religion of any period is the morality of the community of the period, decadence in theistic conceptions must mean decadence of society; but the theory of a universal social degeneration will hardly find favor even with Mr. Lang. Though it is far from being proved that mythology is a product of animistic belief, it is true that the morality assumed in early myths (and in later ones as well) is often inferior to that ascribed to the great gods. Theology and mythology represent, to a certain extent, two distinct lines of thought, two currents, as Mr. Lang well puts it, flowing together through religion. Theology deals with the conduct of life, mythology with the construction of the world and of society. For this reason the latter permits the play of popular fancy to an extent not generally possible in the former. Mythology is not religion but science—a distinction that Mr. Lang fails to make. When men approach the gods in worship, they think of them as the guardians of the existing social laws; when they undertake to account for the origin of things, they are unrestrained by moral law, and may give loose rein to the baser side of human nature. It is the difference between dealing with the present, for which men feel responsible, and dealing with the past, for which they do not feel responsible. One example is found among the Central Australians, whose stories of the ancestors (creators and social constructors) set at naught all the ethical customs that the people now observe with the utmost strictness. An example of a slightly different character is furnished by the extermination law of Deuteronomy (ch. 13), and Joshua (chs. 6–11), which has in mind a former vanished situation, and would probably have been impossible for the end of the seventh

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<sup>1</sup> This doubtless is the signification of the Central Australian Ungambikula, "out of nothing" (Spencer and Gillen, *Central Australia*, p. 388), not, however, exactly "self-existing," as Mr. Lang renders it (*Making of Religion*, p. xxi).

century B. C. in the kingdom of Judah. What the Israelites in the time of the conquest actually did to the Canaanites was far more humane than the policy ascribed by the later writers to Yahweh; but we should not call this a proof of ethical degeneration.

There is, however, another consideration, which has been well stated by Mr. Lang himself.<sup>1</sup> Myths often contain expressions of early usages and ideas that are condemned by a later age. Cannibal gods, for example, had their origin in a cannibal society, and polyandrous goddesses in a polyandrous society.<sup>2</sup> Stories of this sort continue for a long time to stand side by side with elevated conceptions of the character of the gods; the examples are too well known to need citation. Here, again, we have not degeneration, but rather the opposite. It is the antagonism between the more advanced and the more backward circles of the community; an antagonism that exists, so far as we know, everywhere and at all times. Some portion of the morally low mythical material reflects the usages of a former time. We cannot say which of the two lines of thought, the religious and the mythical, was the earlier. Probably they began at the same time; the wish to account for the world was probably coeval with the impulse to enter into relations with the superhuman powers.<sup>3</sup> The fact suggests another point that Mr. Lang appears not to have had in mind. He has observed that in some cases, among savage tribes, **morally low** stories occur in conjunction with **morally high conceptions** of deities, and in these cases his explanation is **degeneration**. But the same fact appears in Homer, and the explanation is probably the same in the two cases. In Homer we easily recognize a fairly high moral conception with a background of low myths, and we assume that the Homeric period was preceded by a long period of barbarism. We have probably to assume a similar condition in the savage history known to us. But Mr. Lang appears to take it for granted that Daramulun, Baiame, and the rest are primitive, and he cannot account for their moral eleva-

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<sup>1</sup> In the first edition of his *Myth, Ritual and Religion*.

<sup>2</sup> See Barton, *Semitic Origins*, ch. 2.

<sup>3</sup> There are facts that appear to militate against this view. The question is too large to be discussed here.

tion except by the supposition of a primitive ethical intuition in the human soul. Now, from the point of view of theism, human nature is a divine revelation, and human thought a divine intuition, and so far he is right; but he apparently wishes to see in high savage morality a full-grown intuition independent of the ordinary processes of human growth. His hypothesis involves the supposition of a full-grown social order, since the ethical laws to which he refers relate mainly to the constitution of society. He forgets that a hundred millenniums of human experience lie behind the gods of the lowest tribes we know. In this space of time there is room for any development that we can conceive, and there is a possible explanation of the ethical differences between mythology and religion.

In another point Mr. Lang's conception of religious history seems to be not well thought out. In the first place, he is under a misconception in supposing that he stands alone in the view that a god is not necessarily a development out of a ghost or a beast, but may have been originally thought of as a man-like being; others have held this view.<sup>1</sup> Thus he spends much time in assailing a position that is by no means the reigning one, and he seems to suppose that in refuting it he is overthrowing the argument for a gradual development of the idea of a god. He makes the mistake of parcelling off the genealogies of superhuman beings too sharply. All spirits, according to him, come from ghosts, and all high gods from man's primitive intuition of an exalted person who is creator and father. But, with our ignorance of early human history, it is impossible to rest in this smooth and simple division. If we had records of savage history for some thousands or myriads of years, we might venture to frame a definite theory of theogony; as a matter of fact, our knowledge of this history extends over only two hundred or three hundred years at most, and even in this short space it is most meagre. Moreover, such knowledge as we have of the history of human ideas and customs leads us to suppose that every idea or custom is complex, and has reached its existing form by the convergence of many lines of thought and experiment. It is not possible to say whether man began by deifying beasts or inanimate objects or human beings or ghosts or by

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<sup>1</sup> Among them Mr. Hartland.

imagining great superhuman man-like beings as the authors of all things. There are facts that may be adduced in favor of all these hypotheses. Who can tell by what devious routes early man reached well-defined conceptions of the unseen Powers? We have to content ourselves with chronicling the earliest facts we can find, and awaiting the discovery of new facts that may throw light on the problem.

Mr. Lang attaches great importance to the fact that in many cases the "high gods" of savages are not approached with sacrifices and offerings, and, as he thinks, were never so worshipped. Such propitiation was reserved, he holds, for the undignified greedy spirits of ancestors and similar inferior supernatural beings. It is possible that certain gods have never been mollified by gifts or importuned for blessings; but in the nature of the case it is impossible for us to determine whether or not this is true. The memory of savages reaches back to no remote period, and what the original custom was they cannot tell. Possibly many ancient gods shared the fortunes of the Zulu Unkulunkulu,<sup>1</sup> who lived so long ago that the recollection of him had become dim, and the people's interest turned to their ancestral ghosts. With such changes in popular cults we may compare the Babylonian and Greek succession of divine dynasties, in which the somewhat vague figures of Heaven and Earth yield to nearer and more human deities. And in fact the savage Supreme Beings, described by Mr. Lang, commonly dwell in Heaven, and are more or less removed from the passions and the affairs of men. On the other hand, such creators or constructors as (according to Spencer and Gillen) the Central Australians recognized were decidedly human in their purposes, plans and modes of action, and neither to them nor to the spirits of the dead were gifts offered. These people seem to have no social relations proper with superhuman or extrahuman beings; they believe that their world was made or shaped by such beings, but, for themselves, they are satisfied to live their lives with such social regulations as have been devised by them in the course of ages. They are very nearly in the position of certain circles of our own time, who hold that the world was made, but see no advantage in entering into relations with the maker.

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<sup>1</sup> As described in Callaway's *Amazulu*.



In this case, as in many others, modern thought, by philosophical reflection, has reached a conclusion not substantially different from that held vaguely by savages. We are unable to say whether or not the present creed of these Australians has always been held by them. If they once paid worship to the creator-ancestors, then some process has gone on in their history of which we know nothing. If they have never paid worship, they may represent an early sub-religious stage, possibly existing at some time everywhere, in which no social bonds united man to the extrahuman powers whose existence he vaguely recognized. Out of such unworshiped powers may have come, in the course of time, the distincter moral figures to whom no worship was offered. It is not improbable that there were different lines of development among different savage tribes, just as there have been among civilized peoples. We cannot explain how it was that the Indians and the Iranians, starting (as apparently they did) from the same body of beliefs, followed diverse paths, or how it was that both of these groups differed religiously so greatly from the Chinese. There appear to be initial and fundamental differences between the various savage systems of thought, and these, as well as their resemblances (in totemism, taboo, etc.), must be studied.

In regard to the relation, as to their origins, between spirits and man-like gods, one obvious point is not always had in mind. There may be such gods that never were spirits, but the rise of a god from a spirit is by no means inconceivable. Mr. Lang and others sometimes speak of spirits as if they were regarded by savages as immaterial. We know, however, that they are supposed to have bodies, real, though of a peculiar character, not subject to the ordinary laws of human bodies: they move rapidly through air or water or solid earth, may assume different shapes or become invisible, yet eat, drink and sleep as human beings do. Now Ea, Indra, Zeus and Yahweh have just such bodies, and, so far as corporeal form is concerned, might once have been spirits. Nor is there any difficulty in supposing that out of a mass of spirits one might in time be clothed with moral qualities and supreme dominion;<sup>1</sup> and it is not necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Hopkins calls my attention to the fact that the Lord-Spirit of Yoga philosophy is at first just such a being—a separate spirit, morally superior to other independent spirits.

to hold that moral gods arose always out of the same primeval form. There are facts that seem to be more easily explained by the supposition of a difference of origin between gods and spirits. In the old Hebrew system the angels (ancient gods) are kept distinct from the spirits; and the Chinese, Hindu, Greek and Hawaiian ancestral spirits form a class by themselves apart from the gods. On the other hand, the two classes, gods and spirits, are often identical in functions and powers: the god of plague is not to be distinguished in this regard from the spirit of disease; the Hebrew spirits sit in the divine council just as the angels do. Doubtless these civilized mythologies belong to a relatively late period, and presuppose a long preceding history; but there seems to be no good reason why the same fundamental ideas should not be found in widely separated ages of religious growth.

Sacrifice and animism are not certainly or necessarily coeval, and they do not imply religious declension. The beginnings of the sacrificial custom are not known to us, and we must beware of constructing the religious history of man from the few and uncertain reports we have received of savage beliefs. These beliefs have not yet been properly examined. When we have good opportunity to test the accounts of travelers we frequently find occasion to doubt their correctness. We criticise them from our several points of view; Mr. Tylor objects to one thing, Mr. Lang to another. Much contempt has been expressed for the reports made by travelers to the effect that certain tribes had no religious beliefs or usages; now, it seems, it may be necessary to guard against crediting savages with too much religion. But, whatever may turn out to be the truth on this point, we have to recognize the fact that sacrifice is connected with that sense of intimate relations between gods and men that has been the starting-point of the higher religions. Sacrifice has its mercenary non-moral side, and doubtless represents a religious conception inferior in certain regards to simple reverence for a just and loving deity. But it has its roots in human nature, and is an advance on a system in which the gods have nothing to do with human life.